

## **Thinking about the Aftermath of 3.11: The Challenge for Japanese Labor Sociology**

**The Japanese Association of Labor Sociology (JALS)**

### **Introduction**

Over three years have passed since March 11, 2011, when a gigantic earthquake caused devastation in the Tohoku region. After the earthquake, it was rightly said that the disaster totally changed the framework of our recognition, marking an epochal point for a different future. Nevertheless, various social problems in Japan remain unsolved, and arguably those situated within the affected region have actually been exacerbated by the disaster. Effectively this means that Japanese society is faced with the same overall social problems as before the disaster, and that Japanese sociology still has to address such problems as social and regional inequalities, social exclusion, and so on. Regarding labor problems, Japanese labor sociology is confronted with at least three problems that it needs to conduct further research on and suggest means for their resolution.

First, the earthquake disaster highlighted the pre-existing employment problems in Japan, particularly in the Tohoku region. Primary industries such as fisheries and marine food processing were widely destroyed in this region, and many jobs in these industries were lost. Consequently, unemployment and precarious jobs remain in the affected area, even though over three years have passed since the gigantic earthquake and resulting huge tsunami.

This situation, however, is not specific to the affected area and there are similarities in other regions in Japan. In Japan, regular employment is also being replaced with irregular or atypical employment resulting in job insecurity. In addition, underemployment can lead to social exclusion for many workers. Therefore, the situation in the aftermath of 3.11 requires Japanese labor sociology to address the problems of employment and social exclusion more seriously.

Second, the earthquake and tsunami also resulted in the breakdown of the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant and serious radiation leakages from the plant. As a result, public opinion and the related social movement opposed to nuclear power plants bloomed in Japan; a part of the labor movement also joined this countermovement against nuclear power plants. However, the Federation of Electric Power Related Industry Workers' Unions of Japan, which is a federation of labor unions in electric power companies, voiced its approval for the continuation of nuclear power plants and opposed the government of the former Democratic Party of Japan, which in those days pursued the abolition of nuclear power plants.

This suggests that enterprise-based unions should balance the profits of enterprises with the interests of workers. This point has been persistently stressed in Japanese labor sociology. Therefore, the situation in the aftermath of 3.11 continues to prompt Japanese labor sociology to do research on enterprise-based unions and their limitations, as well as on alternative union activities.

Third, the earthquake disaster also made explicit the issue of social exclusion for foreign workers. As is well known, many foreign workers in the affected area, who are mostly *technical trainees (ginou-jisyusei)* mainly from China, swiftly went back to their home countries after the disaster. This is because these workers were given somewhat erroneous information from their home countries regarding radiation and as a result were overwhelmingly terrified of its effects. To put it another way, this means that these workers did not effectively belong to regional communities where they lived, and hold no social relationships or social capital with their neighbors in Japan. Therefore, Japanese labor sociology also has to address the problems of foreign workers within globalization.

These tasks for Japanese labor sociology are derived from its history and the research interests of JALS. In order to confirm this point, the history of labor sociology in Japan and the activities of JALS will be reviewed briefly.

## **A Brief History of Labor Sociology in Japan**

### *Inception*

The inception of Japanese labor sociology dates to the prewar era. Sociology in Japan, including that of labor, was imported from European countries. Japanese labor sociology was also influenced by Max WEBER and Emile DURKHEIM, and originally started as the sociology of occupations. A representative scholar in this field in the prewar era was ODAKA Kunio (1941). He studied occupations from the perspective of the ethics of work (Weber) and social solidarity (Durkheim). He formalized three factors of occupation: subsistence, the emergence of personal characters, and the realization of social solidarity.

Furthermore, he analyzed the hierarchy (*kisen*) of occupations and indicated that such a hierarchy could not be undermined by the strength of social solidarity. In addition, he considered whether or not the free choice of occupations could be achieved, and confirmed that inherent inequalities among workers—derived from their original jobs, education, skills, the conditions of the labor market, and poverty—could constrain such free choice. This interest in social inequalities gradually led Odaka to research social stratification and mobility after World War II.

### *The Postwar Era*

In the postwar era the research interests of Japanese sociologists, particularly in rural and labor sociology, shifted to the modernization of Japanese society and the influence of *feudal* institutions on family, local regions, and enterprise were critically examined. For example, MATSUSHIMA Shizuo (1978) constructed his concept of labor sociology by doing fieldwork on such feudal institutions (*hoken-isei*) as reciprocal organization (*tomoko*) among miners.

Furthermore, Matsushima actively continued to do fieldwork on various companies and industries including mines, an electric power plant, the petrochemical industry, and paper manufacturing. Based on his research results, Matsushima stressed that the consciousness of

Japanese workers was not only determined by feudal institutions but also rationality and realism in pursuing life security to some degree, and that their consciousness was characterized by a dual loyalty (*nijyu chusei*) to their companies and labor unions.

On the other hand, HAZAMA Hiroshi (1964) also did fieldwork with Matsushima and built his own theoretical model of Japanese-style management. He stressed the persistence of feudal institutions in Japanese-style management and called this style *management familism* (*keiei kazokushugi*). In short, the major research interests of Japanese labor sociology were “the feudal” or “the Japanese” in the postwar era.

#### *Advancement*

In the 1960s, social sciences relating to labor problems were promoted and various research topics were addressed. In sociology one of the most popular themes was comparative analysis between Japanese-style management and management styles in other Western societies. One of the reasons why many comparative analyses were implemented was also derived from research interests in the Japanese, which was referred to as “particularity” in Japan.

As is well known, the characteristics of Japanese-style management or industrial relations are defined as lifetime employment (*shushin koyo*), a seniority system (*nenkosei*), and enterprise-based unions. Because James G. ABEGGLEN (1958) stressed the uniqueness and advantage of these characteristics, many scholars in Japan and other countries became interested in their function in the management system. For example, Ronald DORE (1973), one of the most famous “Japanologists,” also carried out a comparative analysis of industrial relations systems in the United Kingdom and Japan. He concluded that industrial relations in the late-starting Japan prevailed over those of the UK and that Japan obtained benefits from her *organization-oriented* enterprises. In other words, Japanese industrial relations systems were not backward but, in a sense, had advanced somewhat from the Japanese.

In the 1970s, while the relatively stagnant economy in Japan had an impact on the loyalties of workers to their companies, as a general rule benign industrial relations enabled the Japanese economy to perform well. In comparison with British workers, INAGAMI Takeshi (1981) indicated that Japanese workers with large corporations were integrated within their organizations and aimed to pursue their careers through lifetime employment. Consequently, in the 1980s, Japanese industrial relations or management systems were praised in academic research and the business world and were regarded as offering superior models. Furthermore, in the process of globalization it was even discussed whether or not Japanese-style management or production systems, which arose and were developed exclusively in Japan, could be transplanted to other societies.

However, on the other hand Japanese-style management systems or industrial relations had been criticized for their low rate of labor compensation, heavy workloads, long working hours, gender inequalities, and more. For example, a journalist named KAMATA Satoshi (1973) carried out participant observation in a Toyota factory and vividly reported the harsh reality of work for staff at Toyota. The Marxist tradition in Japanese labor sociology also had an impact on critical examinations of Japanese-style management. Marxist scholars primarily accused Japanese-style

management for its repressive integration of workers.

In this way, in the 1980s, one of the main research themes in Japanese labor sociology was that of how to estimate the effectiveness of Japanese-style management. As a result, JALS has also addressed this theme continually since its establishment.

## **The Activities of JALS**

### *Establishment*

JALS was established in 1988. It started with a membership of around 100 scholars, which gradually increased to 250. The first President was KAMADA Toshiko, a remarkable scholar on labor disputes in the steel industry. Before its establishment, the Labor Sociology Workshop had been held regularly several times per year since 1982. This workshop was run by scholars interested in labor problems, mainly around the Tokyo area. In many cases, these scholars did independent research on various questions, but this workshop was an opportunity for them to gather and led to the establishment of JALS. A factor which influenced its establishment was that the founders of JALS were actually afraid because research in labor sociology was stagnant at that time.

Since its establishment, JALS has held an annual research meeting and several research workshops to promote research activities, particularly to foster young scholars. For each annual research meeting, JALS plans a factory observation tour for various industries, and gives valuable and interesting opportunities to many participants. Furthermore, it has also published two annual journals carrying research articles by its members. These are: *The Annual Review of Labor Sociology* and *The Journal of Labor Sociology*. Regarding fostering young scholars, JALS has compiled consecutive special issues on fieldwork by proficient scholars in its *Annual Review*, and has invited these scholars to talk about their experiences and skills in fieldwork.

### *Activities and Themes*

The activities of JALS for over 20 years have been presented as main themes of the annual research meetings. JALS has examined several themes since its establishment. These themes have also been published in *The Annual Review of Labor Sociology* as special issues. In the following sections these themes and their social background will be reviewed, through which the activities of JALS will also be identified.

#### **Enterprise-ruled society and enterprise-based unions**

First, as already mentioned, JALS addressed issues related to Japanese-style management. Japanese labor sociologists have often defined a group of issues related to this management system as an “enterprise-ruled society (*kigyo-shakai*).” The concept of an enterprise-ruled society has not necessarily been clearly defined. However, its concept can be summarized as follows—enterprises rule the overall social lives of workers in Japan. In short, predicated on enterprise-based unions connecting benign industrial relations, integrative ideology, and the like, large corporations in

Japan can earn profits with much flexibility in controlling their workers.

Furthermore, because Japanese-style management was prevalent and highly appreciated in Japan and other countries in the 1980s, JALS, many members of which are in some way critical of Japanese-style management and enterprise-ruled society, have often based the annual meeting themes precisely on enterprise-ruled society. For example, given that workers in enterprise-ruled society are required to be adequately educated, trained, and disciplined for work as management demands, it is crucial to examine the issue of education for workers. Therefore, the theme of “enterprise-ruled society and education” was set as the theme of the meeting in 1995.

Enterprise-ruled society was thought to have begun transforming itself as a result of keen competition in globalization in the 1990s. JALS attempted to examine this transformation in the annual research meetings of 1996 and 2000. In 1996, JALS focused on “dispatched workers”. Japanese enterprises, faced with keen competition, pursued more flexibility in management and labor control. As a result, they tended to employ more dispatched workers, who are a type of irregular workers. This was derived partly from the shift of labor policy in Japan—the government admitted the enlargement in the scope of dispatched workers from the late 1990s onwards and finally agreed to an extension from clerical workers to production workers in 2004.

Furthermore, one of the primary managers’ organizations, the Japan Federation of Employers’ Associations (*Nikkeiren*) (1995) published a critical report stating that types of workers or styles of employment in Japanese-style management in the “new age” needed to be classified into three types: workers with skills developed in long-term employment, workers with highly specialized competence, and workers in flexible employment. Among these three types of workers, workers in conventional lifetime employment are counted in the first category. The third category is considered to include irregular workers such as dispatched workers, part-time workers, temporary workers, and other contingent workers.

As is indicated, this report made an explicit statement that Japanese employers, particularly in large corporations, sought functional and numerical flexibility thoroughly in globalization. This statement was obviously endorsed with neoliberalism. Given that enterprise-based unions, which are the dominant style of unionism in Japan, only organize employees within specific enterprises, the membership of these unions will decrease if irregular workers increase. This is a big problem within union activities.

JALS addressed this question in its annual meeting of 1997. If enterprise-based unions decline in the long term, new types of unionism will need to be pursued. The theme of new unionism is also an important topic within JALS. In Japan, for new unionism various movements of personally-affiliated unions, which can be categorized as “social movement unionism,” have recently been identified: the Managers’ Union, the Young Workers’ Union, the Women’s Union, unions organizing foreign workers, and so forth. JALS also recognized this type of new unionism in 1997 and 2012.

### **Gender and female workers**

Second, female workers and gender-related issues have been crucial within JALS’ activities. In Japan, female workers have consistently formed the majority of irregular workers, since

part-time jobs have always been carried out mostly by female workers. Furthermore, the fact that an enterprise-ruled society can generally integrate male workers and force them to work very hard and for long hours can be realized through the domestic work of women, many of whom also work outside their homes.

While many feminist scholars stressed and denounced the injustice of unpaid domestic work almost exclusively executed by women, JALS instead attempted to address female workers and gender-related issues in workplaces in an enterprise-ruled society. For example, JALS set the theme of “female workers in an enterprise-ruled society” for its annual meeting in 1994.

In addition, the membership of JALS includes many female scholars who actively do research on female labor problems—a leading scholar among them is KIMOTO Kimiko. Many of these scholars have recently become interested in the subject of female workers fostering their children. Consequently, based on research on social policy supporting these female workers, the appropriate proportionality of work and life, the participation of male workers in fostering, and other issues, many related presentations have come to be made in annual meetings.

### **Young workers and their careers**

As mentioned above, flexible employment has swiftly come to prevail in Japan as well as in other countries. Above all, more young workers are involved in such employment. They are known as *freeter*, which is a new word coined by combining *free* or *freelance* with *Arbeiter* (German for worker) and defines young contingent workers whose numbers have increased to over two million in the 2000s. Given that these young workers will not be able to obtain skills and income through long-term, stable careers, the existing economic and social systems are likely to malfunction—for example, the national healthcare and pension systems, which are primarily buttressed through young people’s contributions, are likely to be dismantled if many of those young people can only earn low incomes and make no contributions.

JALS has addressed various issues around young workers and their careers several times in annual meetings. In 2003, the transformation of the transition from schools to jobs and the shifting supply pattern of young workers were examined, along with the allocation of young workers in workplaces. Furthermore, it is often indicated that young workers have a tendency to be indecisive regarding what kind of career to follow and, as a result, effectively they become *freeter*. In short, they frequently cannot build a firm identity for work. As a result, subjective factors relating to young workers were also examined in the aforementioned meeting.

In addition, given that young workers are faced with difficulties in obtaining jobs because the number of regular workers is decreasing together with the prevalence of neoliberal labor policies through the process of globalization, various initiatives to support young workers in obtaining jobs are drastically required. In reality, many young people who have graduated from high schools and universities have significant trouble in finding decent and sustainable jobs and often cannot find employment after graduation. In its annual meeting of 2007, JALS examined the support activities of career departments in universities, employment bureaus (*Hello Work*), and high schools, and indicated that these activities could not necessarily refer young workers to employers successfully.

### **Globalization and foreign workers**

As already mentioned, the increase in flexible employment and precarious jobs—dispatched workers, contingent workers, *freeters*, and so forth—is partly due to globalization and its related neoliberal labor policies. Only as late as the late 1980s did Japanese society begin to experience the internationalization of capital and labor or the globalization of the economy. Since then Japanese corporations have transnationalized themselves drastically for the first time in their history, and many foreign workers or immigrant workers have entered Japan.

JALS has tackled various issues on globalization in 1992, 1997, and 2005. Regarding foreign workers, various issues on Japanese Brazilians were examined in 1997. In fact Koreans and Chinese have formed the majority of foreigners in the postwar Japan. This is because many Koreans and Chinese continued to stay in Japan as *foreigners (zai-nichi)* after the colonial liberation, since Korea and Taiwan used to be Japanese colonies and many Koreans and Chinese lived in Japan. However, in the 1980s other foreign workers primarily from Asian countries known as *newcomers*, arrived in Japan to work. Originally the Japanese immigration system was so strict that so-called “simple workers”, who are defined as workers without special skills, could not earn visas for work, but such immigration policies have drastically shifted.

Consequently, in 1991 foreign workers with Japanese ancestors were admitted to work even as simple workers. In short, Japanese Brazilians, who are the largest population with Japanese ancestors in the world, came en masse to work in Japan. Regarding these workers, in the JALS annual meeting of 1997 various issues such as their jobs, their lives in regional communities, their sending communities in Brazil, and so on were discussed.

For Japanese transnational corporations, China has become one of the most popular countries for investment. Furthermore, the East Asian region, including China, has been industrialized for several decades. That means that a working class is being formed in this region and that Japanese transnational corporations will employ these workers. Therefore, the kind of industrial relations that are constructed in this region are of crucial importance. JALS chose this theme for its annual meeting of 2005.

In addition, in relation to such questions and to promote global communication among scholars, Michael BURAWOY—one of the most outstanding labor sociologists and the incumbent President of the International Sociological Association—was invited to participate in the 2008 JALS workshop.

In the above, four primary themes of JALS have been reviewed by taking a glimpse at annual research meetings. However, other themes have also been selected for annual meetings. For example, as a consequence of aging and low fertility in Japanese society the significance and basic problems of care work were examined in 2009, and the roles and significance of labor and service in the public sector or “new publicness (*atarashii kokyō*)” were discussed in 2011.

### **Concluding Remarks: Beyond 3.11**

Given that the aftermath of 3.11 has not seen the end or solution of past problems but their

persistence and recurrence, JALS has to more thoroughly pursue the same topics that it has covered for over two decades. In fact, the affected area in the Tohoku region can be regarded as the epitome of social and labor problems in Japan.

First, employment problems in the affected area reflect those of Japan overall—regular employment is shrinking and irregular jobs are becoming prevalent. Among other things, young workers, who should play central roles in Japan's future, have difficulties finding sustainable jobs from which livable incomes can be earned and decent lives are possible. Japanese labor sociology and JALS must wrestle with these problems earnestly and seek to improve the situation of workers.

Second, the dominant pattern of labor unions in Japan, that is, the enterprise-based union, must also be taken seriously again. It might take social movements, in addition to social policy, to improve deteriorating situations for workers in Japan. Nevertheless, many Japanese labor sociologists—of whom KAWANISHI Hirosuke is a representative—have stressed that the labor movement of enterprise-based unions is limited to organizing workers widely and overcoming enterprise-specific interests.

Irrespective of whether or not nuclear power plants can be approved, there is no doubt that unions affiliated with electric power companies prioritize the interests of their companies over those of the public. Japanese labor sociologists must explore new unionism more seriously, which can overcome the constraints of enterprise-based unions, organize various kinds of irregular workers, and improve the situations of precarious workers.

Third, globalization also has an impact upon the affected area. As has been reported, many subsidiaries and suppliers affiliated with transnational corporations are clustered there, and more than a few foreign workers work there. As the case of the affected area indicates, the fact that transnational corporations employ workers all over the world and many workers migrate globally should be a premise of sociological analysis. Labor sociologists are requested to take globalization into account if they try to find ways of improving the situation of workers and constructing a more inclusive society.

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